Face Yoga: What the science says about these funny face routines for aging

5 MIN READ

MAR. 17, 2026

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Do those time-consuming facial contortion routines work? Or are they influencer slop?

Even if your diet is stuffed with leafy greens and your weekly cardio has your mitochondria humming (and your age clock markers are defying time), aging's still happening. Living for healthy longevity isn't all about aesthetics, but when your chin's sagging and your eyes crinkle with every smile, it can feel like aging's written all over your face.

But maybe it doesn't have to be: For several years, TikTok influencers, YouTube dermatologists, and celebrities have been touting the facelift-like wonders of facial yoga–bug-eyed contortions and tongues-out funny faces that, they claim, can make your face get *stuck*…but in a good, wrinkle- and line-free way.

Thanks to a series of small studies, including **one from last year** that used a palpation device to see how facial muscles changed after doing these moves, there's a still-small, but growing, body of evidence that shows these techniques could work.

How much you ask? I spoke with one of the leading scientists on facial yoga, and to a longtime teacher and practitioner, to help Super Agers understand *how* face yoga is supposed to work, how effective it truly is, and how to sample a few moves that could be worth your face-contorting time.

Does face yoga actually work?

This is the million-dollar question… or scientists *wish* it was. A lack of millions is the

reason face yoga's effects haven't been subjected to large-scale studies, says Murad Alam, M.D., vice chair of dermatology at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University.

"It's not the sort of thing that pharmaceutical companies or entrepreneurs are going to fund, because there's no way to get an FDA approval or a patent on it," he adds. If there's no product at the end of a research pipeline, it's tough for scientists to get the money needed for studies with heaps of participants.

But face yoga has been subjected to several smaller studies, including **a 2018 project led by Alam**. In the study, 27 middle-aged women performed 32 facial exercises every day, then once every two days, over the course of five months. At the end of the study, the women's cheeks were fuller, and it was determined that they looked three years younger.

The theory behind face exercise studies like this is that the muscles in your face are like any other muscles in the body, says Annelise Hagen, who has been teaching facial yoga in New York for 20 years, and the author of *The Yoga Face.*

"They're not significantly different in the way that they perform versus body muscles, or in how they benefit from exercise," she tells us. "The only thing is that you can't have them lift weights, per se, or do something like go running. But you can do reps with them, and you can give them resistance."

By growing these face muscles, Murad says, you're working to do a bit of an end-around on the ways your face ages.

"There are a couple of layers of at pads on top of the muscle and under the skin [of the face]. Those [fat pads] become thinner over time. The face skin also sags, and that causes a decrease in overall facial volume," he explains. Growing the muscles of the face fills some of that volume back in.

In the 2018 study, Alam's subjects saw marked improvement in the size of their cheek

muscles; these grew the most because they're the biggest muscles of the face, so the growth is easier to see and measure. In other similar, small studies, face yoga and exercise has been found to:

• **Define the jawline:** In **a Turkish study published last year**, 12 women around age 50 did a 30-minute facial yoga practice every day for 8 weeks. (You can download a PDF of the exercises **from this link**.) At the end of the study, the scientists used an electrical stimulation tool to see how much the facial muscles had grown and changed; the most significant change was in the digastric muscle, which is located under the chin and defines the jawline.

• **Create firmer, more elastic skin:** In **a South Korean study from 2016**, 16 women aged 35-58 performed a series of five facial moves twice per day for 8 weeks. At the end of the study, the skin around their eyes firmed up.

• **Sometimes improve how "young" lips look:** In **one study**, women who did a series of four lip exercises for 7 weeks found that their upper lips looked younger (but not their lower lips).

• **Impact mental health:** A research review of 7 studies found that facial exercises can reduce depressive symptoms and reduce stress.

Don't get *too* excited just yet. While these benefits are "statistically significant" from a scientific standpoint — and people in the studies often rate themselves as looking younger or being happy with the results — the potential change to your face from these types of exercises won't match that of cosmetic procedures, Alam says.

"I'd say people overestimate it in terms of the amount of benefit they might get … it's a modest benefit because the facial volume we're impacting with facial yoga is related to muscle," he cautions. "We're not trying to replenish the fat as you would with a procedure like a filler. We're trying to grow the muscles underneath the fat, and so we are limited by the size of those muscles."

The change *can't* be massive, then, because the muscles themselves aren't massive.

"The frontalis, the big forehead muscle, they're two strips… they're very thin," explains Hagen. "So you can't get a lot of bang for your buck with them."

And facial yoga routines can be time-consuming. The exercise routine in Alam's study, for example, took around 30 minutes per day. That's right in line with the routines done in other studies.

Hagen says that facial yoga is more than just muscle-building facial exercise, though. Facial massage techniques can increase both circulation to the face, and perform lymphatic drainage, releasing liquid that's stored in the face that can make it look puffy. These two benefits are also the proposed upsides of **jade rollers and facial massage techniques called gua sha**. In research studies, these effects are temporary.

A facial yoga technique to try throughout the day, and 4 more to do this week.

Hagen adds that one of the key factors in the aging of our face isn't how we use it when we're expressing ourselves or exercising, but what we do when we're at rest (or supposed to be).

"When I was in my yoga teacher training in 2000, I was meditating. And my mentor came up to me and asked, 'why are you scowling? You're frowning,'" she says.

When you're concentrating, working, driving, or even scrolling or streaming, you might find that you're scowling, too, putting stress into your body and lines into your face, she cautions. Her solution is an all-day facial yoga practice: Every few hours,

stop and be aware of the position your face is in.

“If we’re aware of it through the course of the day, you can reset with a gentle smile that doesn’t involve the eyes or forehead,” she says. This type of smile won’t just keep lines off your face; it may also make you feel more relaxed and collected.

Hagen suggests bringing this same smile into practicing the following moves. As she demonstrated them to me, she exhorted me not to strain my mouth and face, but to remain serene, keeping my mouth in the gentle smile position.

While most studies had participants do moves like these every day — and in some cases, twice per day — Hagen suggests practicing these four poses every other day for wider eyes, a more defined chin, and fuller cheeks.

Lion’s Breath:

How to do it:

1. Breathe in, drawing your face together.

2. Exhale, sticking out your tongue far, widening your eyes, and making a hot, audible breath.

3. Repeat 3-4 times.

“Surprise Me” Face:

How to do it:

1. Pick a point far away at the horizon to look at.

2. Keeping your head centered, look surprised: Open your eyes wide, exposing the whites of your eyes. But don’t grimace: Keep your mouth in a gentle smile.

3. If this makes your forehead wrinkle up, place your fingers on your forehead and pull up, as if you were gently lifting off the crown of your head.

4. Hold this position for 10-20 seconds, then rest for a beat. Repeat 3 times.

Wet Blanket:

How to do it:

1. Hold your head in a neutral position, and put on a gentle smile.

2. Wet your tongue, and then flatten your tongue against the roof of your mouth, trying to get the entire surface of your tongue against the roof of your mouth.

3. Suck the saliva up to the roof of your mouth, and keep sucking. Remember to keep a gentle smile.

4. Continue for 10-20 seconds. Repeat 3-4 times per day.

Baby Bird:

1. Put the tip of your tongue in the center of the roof of your mouth. You'll keep it there throughout this move.

2. Lean your head to look up at the ceiling. Smile big so your teeth are showing.

3. Maintaining your smile and tongue position, swallow. Do 3-6 swallows.

4. Maintaining your smile and tongue position, turn your head so you're looking up and to the right. Swallow 3-6 more times.

5. Now turn so you're looking up and to the left. Swallow 3-6 more times.

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